

Intercultural Understanding:

RECONCILING THE DISCONNECTION BETWEEN
AFRICANS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS VIA
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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Abstract

On the subject of reconciliation, one question comes to mind: "How can the teaching of language and literature become a viable tool in bridging the gap that exists between Africans and African Americans?" There is a disconnection that exists on both sides. In urban school districts, at least 45% of the students in Foreign Language classes are Africans and African Americans. Generally, these students (and this is generally the African American students) think that there are no existing connections in common with their own cultures. On the other hand, the African students will learn about other aspects of their cultures which they might not have known before or unwillingly circumvented. This research will focus on how the utilization of African and African American literature such as poetry in education, to teach intercultural understanding in order to repair the disconnection that has existed for decades. Students will gain a better understanding of each other's cultures and begin to see a connection that they can relate to. It will also explore how to use the dialect changes and idiosyncrasies in African poetry and literature that might be similar to those of the African American Vernacular English, to teach the various languages spoken on the African content.

Intercultural Understanding: Reconciling the Disconnect between Africans and African Americans via Language and Literature

Throughout the several hundred years after slavery, there has been a continued rift or disconnection between Africans who come from the very land where the slaves were captured, and the transplanted African Americans who live in the land of the former colonial power where slavery existed for over 300 years. This disconnection has existed throughout the decades and has been debated and written about in several publications, but still without resolve. In an article in Ebony magazine several years ago, the journalist analyzed the state of African/African-American relationship and its challenges. Some of the disconnection was being repaired via friendships, relationships and marriages with some positive results. On the other hand, some of the interviewees discussed the negative aspects and the state of the relationship between the two groups. To that end, we must examine and explore the other obvious ways (which are first glance overlooked) to begin the reconciliation that is needed in order to move forward through education via language and literature.

Apart from food, language and literature are the two most iconic aspects of life that can bring people from different cultures together. The ignorance of another culture creates fear, distrust, animosity and a disconnection between cultures in today's society. As always, to be educated about a culture different from your own is the key to combatting this ignorance, bridge the gap and erase the fear and disconnection in order to start the reconciliation process. Tradition holds that when one first meets another person who's culture is different from your own, the first group of questions that are normally the topic of conversation are: "what language (s) do you speak?", "what's the food like?", what kinds of things do you do?", "what is your music like?", "what do you do for fun?", and the list goes on. As we examine these questions, we begin to realize that they all have to do with language and most importantly culture.

As a foreign language faculty member, I have always been a proponent of “know the language, know the culture”, which is to say that you can’t really know the language and its pragmatics if you don’t really know the culture. When learning a foreign language, one of the most basic things you need to learn is not just how to say something, but when and why to use certain words and or phrases. In both the African and the African American community, the roots of language and literature, albeit oral literature has always been a way to bring people together and find common ground. These roots run deep and are played out in the form of festivals, customs, traditions, food and other devices that have become not only an innate way of celebrating one’s own community, but a way of introducing others to the community as well.

With emigration, travelling and war, many of our brothers and sisters from the African continent find themselves transplanted just as their African American counterparts, into communities that are very different from their own. Hence, the need to teach their children who are either very young at the time of emigration, adult children raised in their native country’s traditions and customs, or are born in the family’s newfound home country, to teach them about the traditions and teach them the language in order to preserve the culture. There is truth to the old adage “you have to start with them when they’re young”. When communities come together or meet for a common cause or to protest, things usually escalate or get nurtured (whether good or bad) via the younger generation. They are the ones that can and do bridge the gap or either perpetuate the fear and disconnection that can exist. One of the ways to help the younger generation is to impart to them the roots of their culture and language. It is my experience as an ESL educator, that as the younger generation are acclimating to their new environment, they sometimes tend to want to leave their culture behind.

Before we talk about teaching and preserving the culture through language and literature, we must first discuss the roots and the beginning of African and African American literature. As we all know, the art of storytelling has been prevalent in both cultures with the African American culture receiving its foundation for this great art from their ancestors who

came to the United States by way of the slave trade. On the other hand, storytelling in the African community is something that has been passed on and continued for hundreds of years.

According to “the father of African Literature” Chinua Achebe:

The power of the storyteller lies in his or her ability to appeal to the mind and to reach beyond his or her particular circumstance and thus speak to different periods and generations; the good storyteller is not bound by narrow political or personal concerns or even by the demands of specific historical moments. (Achebe, 1996)

This quote from a man who was not the first African writer, but the first African writer to receive major international notoriety in the 1950's, exemplifies the viability in using literature as a tool to educate both the African community and the African American community about each other. The roots of African literature goes as far back as around 1500 BCE. There were books such as: “The Book of Dead”, “Hymn of Akhenaten” (1375 BCE), “Herodotus: History”, and “Aesop: Fables” among many others (qtd. in *The Cambridge History* xxii). While most of these writings mentioned are tied to major historical and political events on the continent, they are still important to mention because the knowledge of literary writings such as these can assist in the breaking down the walls of stereotypes and or misconceptions of African literature and culture as a whole, by other cultures, specifically African Americans. A chronological account provided by Cambridge Press spans the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. This is critical because in order to appreciate a culture different from your own, one must know the history of that culture.

The roots of African literature is ultimately tied to and inbred from its rich oral history tradition. This is an element of African culture that has been carried over beyond the continent into the African diaspora that includes the United States. Simply put, this is a commonality that is a part of the fabric of both cultures. Liz Gunner of the University of Johannesburg states:

The continent of Africa can be viewed as a site enormous, long, and ongoing creativity in relation to orality as a vector for the production of social life, religious beliefs, and the constant constituting and reconstituting of society, ideology and aesthetics. (qtd. in *The Cambridge History 1*)

Gunner also states that Africa as it relates to oral history can be regarded as the “oral continent par excellence” (1). An extension of this great oral history are the folktales which are and have been told with great moral lessons. Both of these are the foundation of what we know today as written African literature be it traditional, modern and or contemporary.

The roots of African American literature while it does not extend back as far as African literature has a similar background as it relates to oral history being the foundation and can be traced back as far as the arrival of slaves to this country. Just like African literature, African American literature is an integral part of the black experience in America. Its roots and traditions is a direct product of the traditions that travelled primarily from the West Coast of Africa via Ghana, Mali, Songhay, just to name a few (*Worley, Perry 1*). For slaves, this oral history became a way of preservation and survival in a foreign land. It has been the foundational ingredient and basis for some of the greatest novels written by African Americans. This also extends to the great collection of poetry written by African Americans. However, as Graham and Ward points out in the Cambridge History of African American Literature, the literary history of African American literature, be it oral or written, is very diverse and complex due to its diverse and complex roots. They state that: “the forced merger of African ethnic groups into an identity named African American...” (1).

Hence, which brings us to the point of this article that language and literature can be used as viable tools to create reconciliation between Africans and African Americans. As stated before, the role of language in any culture plays an important role as one of the catalyst to bridging the gap of indifference and stereotypes between cultures. According to Dr. F. Abiola Irele, in African society, language is very diverse and complex due to the dynamics of ethnic

and cultural diversity (qtd. in *The Cambridge History* 21). This is a rich part of African culture that is not necessarily known by many African Americans. While there are the Pan Africanists, the Muslims, scholars and others who may have this knowledge, there are a lot of others who don't consider it a necessary part of their intellectual repertoire.

Case in point, I teach an International Studies course where I invite native speakers of various languages and culture to come and speak to my class. The students (primarily African American), are generally in awe and surprised at the differences between the culture and languages that are presented to them by the native speakers from African countries such as Rwanda, Uganda and Nigeria. In essence, they assumed that the information presented would be the same. However, they could also see some of the parallels between some of the African cultures and African American culture. Parallels such as the history of language use in African American community and the African community. For example, the Swahili language and how it is spoken in different areas of Africa with a slightly different dialect, words, etc. This is precisely why not only the teaching of the target language is important, but teaching the literature of the target language is equally important because it is a direct connection to the culture of that language.

So in using language and literature as a tool of reconciliation of the overall disconnection that exists between Africans and African Americans, it is important to look at education. Education not just for the younger generation discussed earlier, but for adults as well. Literature and language can be either an adhesive bond that brings these two communities together or the wedge that drives them worlds apart because of ignorance, misconceptions and or stereotypes. The fact that we have such an organization like the ASA and the field of Africana Studies is a testament to the fact that education can and should be one of the driving forces to reconcile over 2 decades of indifferences, etc. The cultural values represented in the teaching of language and literature is the catalyst to set the stage.

In urban school districts and some universities (the number diminishes as it gets to the collegiate level-which is precisely why the courses need to include more relatable content), at least 45% of the students in Foreign Language classes are Africans and African Americans. Generally, these students (and this is generally the African American students) think that there are no existing connections in common with their own cultures. On the other hand, the African students will learn about other aspects of their cultures which they might not have known before or unwillingly circumvented. This makes the focus of this article very important as to how educators can utilize African and African American literature such as poetry, to teach intercultural understanding to repair the disconnection that has existed for decades. Students will gain a better understanding of each other's cultures and begin to see a connection that they can relate to. The other interesting connection is how to use the dialect changes and idiosyncrasies, if any, in African poetry and literature that might be similar to those of the African American Vernacular English, to teach some of the various languages of the African diaspora.

In my research regarding Creoles, the use of, the varieties and who speaks them, I have found that there are many varieties that exist. Countries such as Caper Verde, where a Portuguese blend of Creole is spoken (Portuguese mixed with West African words), it is called Kabuverdianu. Other countries where a varieties of Creoles are spoken are: the Comoros - Shikomoro (Swahili and Arabic), Guinea-Bissau-Portuguese Creole, among several others (nationsonline.org). African students from these countries will be at an advantage over other students from the continent in that they would be able to relate to the use of AAE in literature. However, they will also have something to share with the African American students who will learn a creole from a different part of the world.

To some students, learning a second language can be very intimidating, but at the same time very rewarding. To the monolingual African American student it is an intimidating and tedious process unless they love the art of speaking various languages or just learning anything related to different parts of the world. To the generally multilingual African student, learning a

new language is an easier process, but does not come without its challenges. Things such as different cultural concepts and pragmatics play a major part in learning a language. I have taught foreign languages to various types of students and have seen both sides of the coin and speak about this from a personal perspective, as I am also multilingual. When teaching any content, be it foreign language, history, and whether it is on the secondary level or the collegiate level, the professor or teacher has to find tools that the students can relate to. So, when discussing the teaching of languages, literature becomes a big part of the equation. Literature, be it poetry, fiction, historical fiction or non-fiction, is the key to unlocking the mystery that is associated with the myths, misconceptions and propaganda that comes at the students from either the general media and or the “old wives tale” that seem to turn myths into facts which continues to spread and perpetuate untruths about a culture and its people.

In my research done in 2012: “Dialectal changes and idiosyncrasies in the teaching of a second language to minority students using Afro Cuban poetry”, I discussed the fact that the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities has mandated via the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) that the areas to focus on in preparing students for the 21st century in the area of foreign language, is the teaching of communication, culture, connection, comparison and community. This embodies everything that is important to a great cross cultural exchange between cultures. Once the student begins to learn a language whether it is an African American student learning French, Swahili, Arabic, Portuguese or any of the other languages spoken by their African counterparts or the African student learning English (with the American dialect versus the British English dialect), Spanish or another language; this opens up the door for communication because the student has to practice in order to become proficient. It also allows the African American student to see the diversity of the African continent and that it is not a culture where “one size fits all” type of orientation and allows the African student to also do the same from the maze of myths and preconceived notions. As for the other 4 components, once the student begins to learn the

culture of the target language via literature, they are able to practice all 4: making the connection with what they have learned to the reality of what they have experience; they are also able to make the direct comparison between their own communities and the communities that they are learning about. In 2012 research, I also discussed using the similarities between the Afro Cuban Creole used in Afro Cuban poetry by Afro Cuban poets such as Nicolas Guillén and Exilia Saldaña (an important note, there are some Cubans who will deny the existence of a Creole in their country) and the African American English dialect that is used in African American poetry by poets such as Langston Hughes and James Baldwin (Fleming 8).

In discussing language and literature in this context, the exact same parallel can be utilized. There are creoles of some of the languages spoken by Africans that have some similarities to the African American English dialect as it relates to the construction and use. It is also important to note however, that when using the terminology AAE, I am not referring to Ebonics. One important aspect of teaching a foreign language is creating an authentic environment. Teachers and professors can do this by utilizing maps, photos of the places where the target language is spoken (also bringing to life the places discussed in the literature), personalities important to the culture of the target language, artefacts, native speakers as guest and taking students into the community of the target language (8).

As stated before, in the previous research, I focused on poetry. However, in this article, I use the term literature to encompass poetry and some fiction and historical fiction as I could not leave out some of the masters such as: Chinua Achebe, Aimé Césaire, Calixthe Beyala, Aminata Sow Fall, Léopold Senghor among others. A wide range of authors such as these will allow students to delve into different periods of history and culture in Africa and enrich their experience while erasing that air of indifference that still lingers.

In conclusion, one of the pathways to building bridges is education. The gap or disconnection that has existed can be erased by educating the masses of both cultures. However, not just education via a conferences, but education at a grassroots level such as

schools, universities and communities. Also, we must steer away from just a general “overview” but vehicles more specific as education via language and literature. During her presentation at the 2014 ASA (African Studies Association), Dr. Micere Mugo discusses that the use of creativity can be used for the healing process in the reconstruction, reconciliation and rethinking violence, which was the theme of this year’s conference. Hence, the idea of using language and literature is the perfect fit for us to explore.

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